

The Purple Plague — Part 1

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Welcome to Once Upon a Meadow. Our stories are written for the ear, so for those able, we recommend listening while reading along. Transcripts may contain minor errors; please check the audio before quoting.

Once upon a time, there lived a community that shared a meadow with a stream running through it. There was Rabbit, Honey Bee, and Elder Oak, along with a young human. The child's name was Maurice. During the summer, Maurice lived with his mothers in a cabin at the edge of the meadow.

One day, he was playing quietly in the meadow. He had learned that the animals would join him if he sat *very* still.

“Good afternoon, Maurice,” said Rabbit, hopping out from the tall grass.

“Well, hello, Rabbit!” said Maurice.

You might be surprised that a boy could talk to animals. However, this is a gift that some children — but almost no grownups — possess.

“This is wonderfully warm weather,” said Honey Bee. She settled on a coneflower beside Maurice.

“I see your moms planted a garden,” said Rabbit. “It’s nice when human neighbors add to the beauty of our shared land.”

“What’s even better is that I got to help plant the seeds!” said Maurice. “And every day I water them so that they’ll grow big and strong, like me.”

Honey Bee flitted away from Maurice and buzzed over to some purple flowers at the edge of the meadow. She had never seen flowers like this before. They looked like tiny frogs amidst the lush leaves and tall stems.

“I bet there will be lots of nectar in these flowers,” said Honey Bee, flying excitedly in circles around Maurice’s head.

“Those are Purple Frogweeds,” said Maurice. “They’re growing faster than anything else we planted. In fact, they’re doing so well, they’ve even spread out of the garden.”

“The flowers are pretty,” said Rabbit. “And they have big leaves that will give me a cool, place to rest on hot days.”

Rabbit wondered what Elder Oak thought of the newly arrived plant. All of the animals respected the wisdom of the ancient tree, who had lived beside the meadow for longer than any of them could imagine.

“Elder Oak,” said Rabbit, looking into the branches that stretched far above the meadow, “are you pleased to have a new plant moving into our community?”

“I understand your excitement,” said Elder Oak. “But oftentimes it is best to wait and see.”

In the following weeks, Purple Frogweed spread farther into the meadow. When autumn arrived, Maurice and his moms went back to the city.

The next spring the animals were romping in the meadow.

“Look, Honey Bee,” said Rabbit, snuffling in the moist soil. “There are so many Purple Frogweeds sprouting up!”

“Yes,” said Honey Bee, landing on the tip of Rabbit’s ear. “Soon there will be flowers, and I can drink the nectar to make honey.”

“And the leaves on the Purple Frogweeds look yummy!” said Rabbit. They twitched their nose in happy anticipation — kind of like how you might have a big goofy grin when you’re about to eat an ice cream cone.

Rabbit took a huge bite of Purple Frogweed. But almost immediately, they scrunched up their face and shook their head madly. Their ears flopped back and forth and nearly swatted poor Honey Bee.

The leaves weren’t tasty at all. They were bitter. And prickly. Rabbit spit them out.

By the time Maurice and his moms returned in early summer, half of the meadow was covered in purple flowers. It was pretty, but Rabbit and Honey Bee were getting anxious. The Frogweed was spreading so fast that it was choking out the nutritious clover, daisies, and grasses that Rabbit ate. That meant Rabbit was constantly hungry.

As for Honey Bee, the honey she and her sisters made from the Purple Frogweed was awful. They had to fly far away to find flowers with sweet nectar. And the long journeys made them tired.

Maurice could tell that his animal friends were suffering.

“The new plant was supposed be pretty, not take over the whole meadow,” said Maurice. “What went wrong?”

“Elder Oak will know,” said Rabbit, leading the others into the shade beneath the ancient tree. Honey Bee flew slowly into the meadow and rested on Maurice’s shoulder. Maurice wasn’t worried about being stung, because bees won’t hurt you unless they’re scared.

“Elder Oak,” said Rabbit, “we were excited about how pretty the Purple Frogweed made our home.”

“We thought that lots of flowers would be good for the meadow,” said Honey Bee.

“But we were wrong, weren’t we Elder Oak?” asked Maurice.

They waited in silent respect for the ancient tree’s answer.

“Over the centuries, I have come to understand that *some* new plants and animals fit into natural communities,” said the oak. A summer breeze rustled the leaves, as the old tree continued. “However, you never know which ones will become bullies and push aside the natives.”

“Like how people from Europe stole the land from the Native Americans,” said Maurice, who learned about this in school.

“Newcomers wreck *everything*,” grumbled Rabbit.

“Not always,” said Elder Oak. “When I was just a sprout, the Pilgrims brought dandelions to America as a medicine for stomach problems. Before long, dandelions arrived in this meadow. They shared their seeds with finches and other birds.”

“And dandelions provide sweet nectar for me!” said Honey Bee.

“And they provide tender, tasty leaves for me,” said Rabbit, who now appreciated that they’d been too hasty in judging newcomers.

“So, dandelions are good neighbors,” said Maurice.

“My ancestors were *also* brought to America from across the ocean,” said Honey Bee.

“Bees pollinate plants so they can make fruits and seeds,” said Maurice. “Bees aren’t bossy, are they?”

“Well... when we arrived, we pushed aside some of the native bees,” Honey Bee said with a sad buzz. “Today we are better at fitting into communities. I’m not sure that the meadow creatures can adapt to Purple Frogweed fast enough.”